Israel and the War of Attrition

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SINCE IT BECAME an independent nation in 1948, Israel has fought six wars against its Arab neighbors. The 1948-1949 conflict, called the War for Independence, demonstrated that the new nation could stand on its own despite violent opposition to its existence. In the 1956 war in the Sinai, Israel proved that a preemptive strike could delay an enemy's preparation for war for years.

The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) reached its apogee during the Six-Day War of June 1967 and demonstrated the value of intelligence and planning. The Yom Kippur War of 1973 revealed the dangers of Israeli overconfidence. Israel's invasion of Lebanon 9 years later produced internal dissent and conflict between military and political objectives. But Israel's longest war, the War of Attrition, fought between Israel and Egypt from 1967 to 1970, is hardly remembered at all.[1] When people do remember it, they usually remember it only as being a prelude to the Yom Kippur War.[2]

The Six-Day War resulted in Israel's occupying the Sinai Peninsula. Egypt sought to force Israel to withdraw from the territories conquered in the Six-Day War; Israel sought to retain its foothold on the Sinai Peninsula to prevent an Egyptian or pan-Arab offensive and to achieve a regional cease-fire. Combat operations were generally limited to cross-border shellings, raids, ambushes, naval and air strikes, terror, and sabotage.[3]

The War of Attrition was Egypt's first attempt to force Israel to recognize that its continued occupation of the Sinai Peninsula was not in its best interests. The war was also a testing ground for Egypt and Israel to gauge the effectiveness of weapons that they would use again in 1973.[4] The war profoundly affected Egypt's and Israel's perceptions of each other's combat effectiveness and deterrent power, which in turn, had far-reaching effects in the next struggle.

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Egyptian President Gamal Abd el-Nasser's purpose in initiating the War of Attrition was to compel Israel to withdraw from the east bank of the Suez Canal and, eventually, from the Sinai Peninsula. Nasser based his decision to begin hostilities on an analysis of Israeli strengths and weaknesses. In his view, Israel's one notable weakness was a small population relative to Egypt's. Because of this, Nasser concluded that Israel could absorb fewer casualties than Egypt could. He also knew that Israel did not have a large professional army but relied largely on citizen-soldiers. Not only would casualties significantly affect Israel's economy, so would mobilization for war.

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An Israeli soldier approaches a branch of the Suez Canal.

Embassy of Israel

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Nasser also proposed to turn the IDF's major strength—its doctrine of flexible mobility—against itself by forcing Israel to use unfamiliar tactics. Israel's successes in 1956 and 1967 largely resulted from Israel's ability to rapidly bring decisive force to bear on enemy centers of gravity, relying heavily on the use of armor.

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Anticipating Egypt's strategy, Israel changed its strategy. Following the Six-Day War, the Israeli high command devised a way to defend its newly occupied territory in Sinai against an Egyptian crossing of the Canal. Major General (MG) Israel Tal and MG Ariel Sharon proposed a system of defense in depth. Sharon wrote, "[M]aintaining an Israeli presence at the western edge of the Sinai did not mean we had to sit down along the entire length of the Canal. We could carefully choose one or two locations, on the Great Bitter Lake, for example, where we would not be directly under their guns. . . . I proposed that we should base our defense on the natural line of hills and dunes that runs parallel to the Canal [5 to 8] miles to the east and dominates the Canal plain. A second line with our mobile reserves should be established [15 to 20] miles from the Canal, where the mountains begin and the Mitla and Gidi passes cut toward the interior. Between the first line and the Canal we should run mobile patrols, keeping on the move constantly and unpredictably so that we would not be sitting ducks for ambushes, snipers, and artillery."[7]

The Bar-Lev Line

In spite of these and similar arguments, MG Yeshayahu Gavish and IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Chaim Bar-Lev overruled Sharon and Tal. Gavish and Bar-Lev advocated building a long series of static fortifications, subsequently known as the Bar-Lev Line, on the east bank of the Canal. Most Israeli soldiers were not familiar with this type of defense and had never used barbed wire, mines, or sandbags. The defense also nullified Israel's advantage in mobility and made the War of Attrition possible.[8]

Nasser's strategy appeared sound, but it did not work. Thousands of Egypt's artillery shells impacted Israeli positions on the Bar-Lev Line, but even as Israeli casualties mounted, no general cry for an end to the war went up in Israel. Nasser had underestimated Israel's will to fight. Although a group of high school students wrote to Prime Minister Golda Meir suggesting that the government was too content with the idea of keeping the nation in a state of war, and

that it was difficult to reconcile their upcoming mandatory military service with the notion of "ein breira" (Hebrew for "no choice"), Israel's students proved willing to endure the War of Attrition. The conflict's costs never became a political issue.[9]

New Weapons

The War of Attrition was an opportunity for both countries to try out their newest weapons. Egypt had received hundreds of Soviet T-54 and T-55 tanks to replace the T-34s and T-54s lost during the Six-Day War, but the war was not to be one of large-scale tank battles. As it happened, the T-55's most noteworthy appearance occurred when the Israelis crossed the Canal with a unit of six captured T-55s, thus attacking Egyptian positions with Egyptian tanks.[10]

Naval technology played only a minor role in the conflict, although it did have major repercussions for the future of warfare. On 21 October 1967, two Egyptian missile boats, anchored inside Port Said harbor, launched three Soviet-supplied Styx surface-to-surface missiles at the Israeli destroyer *Eilat*, the flagship of the Israeli Navy. *Eilat* was patrolling off the Sinai coast when all three missiles struck and sank it, killing 47 and wounding 90. This was an important event in naval history; it was the first time a surface-launched missile sank a ship. The attack prefigured the missile boat battles of the Yom Kippur War and the Exocet attacks on British shipping in the Falklands War a decade later.[11]

The War of Attrition also marked the first use of drones or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for reconnaissance. An Israeli major serving in IDF intelligence suggested mounting cameras on remote-controlled toy aircraft, which were too small to hit with antiaircraft fire, and sending them over the Canal as reconnaissance aircraft. Israel purchased three such drones from the United States for $850, and trial runs conducted over Israeli positions demonstrated the concept's validity. When the first UAV flew over Egyptian positions, the Egyptians did not even fire at it, and it returned with excellent photographs. Advanced versions of these vehicles have since become important to the intelligence-gathering process.[12]

E-Systems

The Mitla West Watch Station in the Sinai.

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Evaluating Technology on the Battlefield

Egyptian and Israeli air forces used the War of Attrition to conduct major evaluations of technology. The Egyptian Air Force (EAF) accepted over 100 MiG-21s and hundreds of other aircraft from the Soviet Union to replace Egyptian aircraft that Israel had destroyed on the ground in its preemptive strike

The crew of an SA-3 Goa surface to air missile rushes to their station during a training exercise.

Egyptian Embassy

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on Egypt at the outset of the Six-Day War. To counter this, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) arranged to buy A-4 Skyhawks and F-4 Phantoms from the United States.[13]

Initially, the IAF's role in the War of Attrition was relatively minor. The IAF sent Mirages to intercept Egyptian MiGs only when they crossed the Canal to attack positions on the Bar-Lev Line and at Sharm el-Sheikh. Eventually, though, IAF commander MG Mordechai "Moti" Hod sent teams of Mirages into Egypt to attack MiG patrols and to bait the EAF into dogfights, the majority of which the Israelis won. At first the EAF responded by increasing the number of MiGs sent to tangle with the Mirages, but the IAF countered the escalation. Eventually Nasser conceded air superiority to the IAF and simply stopped sending planes.[14] But this did not mean an end to the war. Nasser still had artillery, and the Egyptian guns continued to pound Israeli positions along the Canal.

Having gained air superiority, the IAF now supported the Army by mounting a massive strike on Egyptian positions, dropping 159 tons of bombs and 72 canisters of napalm during a 2-hour period. The Egyptians had erected a networked air defense system that included Soviet-supplied SA-2 surface-to-air missiles, but the SA-2 was only effective at hitting targets above 3,000 feet, as the Israelis were well aware. IAF pilots flew in below the level of Egyptian radar and took out the SA-2s along with the Egyptian artillery positions.[15]

Still, neither the Egyptians nor the Israelis gave up. In fact, both sides escalated the strikes. Nasser begged the Soviets for help. Reluctantly the Soviets sent additional SA-2s, batteries of the newer SA-3s, and radar-guided antiaircraft batteries, which Soviet soldiers networked and operated. The batteries were effective against targets flying at any altitude and were sufficiently dispersed so that Israel could not easily attack them from the air. When Israel sent its new F-4 Phantoms to neutralize these batteries, Egypt shot two of the Phantoms down in a single day.[16]

The United States reacted by sending Israel more Phantoms and Skyhawks as well as jamming pods for the Phantoms. The pods, designed to confuse the SA-2s' radar, worked—but only against the SA-2s. During the first raid in which Israel used the jamming pods, SA-3s hit one Phantom and shot down another. Still, Israel destroyed 4 of the 10 batteries it targeted.[17]

Throughout the war, the Soviets blamed Egyptian losses on operator cowardice or failure to understand Soviet training. They chided the Egyptians for having lost numerous pieces of high-technology military equipment to the Israelis, including T-55 and T-62 tanks and a P-12 radar. In July 1970, the Soviet Union decided to teach Israel a lesson by patrolling the Canal Zone with MiG-21s. The Israelis responded by shooting down five Soviet MiGs on 30 July. Three of the aircraft that scored MiG kills were older Mirages. Israeli planes were not better than Russian aircraft, but IAF pilots were better than their Russian counterparts.[18]

Neither side could afford continued escalation. Israel had humiliated the Soviets, but the Soviets could not afford to raise the stakes against one of the United States's major allies. Similarly, Israel had gained a tactical victory but could not afford to pressure the Soviets further. Egypt and Israel accepted a cease-fire, which went into effect on 8 August 1970.[19]

A Hollow Victory

Both Egypt and Israel claimed victory, and there were arguments to be made for both sides' claims. Although Nasser's purpose in prosecuting the war

had been to compel Israel to withdraw from the Canal Zone, at war's end, Israelis remained on the east bank, secure in the knowledge that they had suffered far fewer casualties than had the Egyptians. Still, despite the high cost in human life, Egypt felt it had won at least a moral victory.

Unlike in 1967, when Egyptian troops had fought disgracefully, the Egyptian Army and Air Force had stood their ground against the superbly trained IAF, and the average Egyptian regained some lost pride. This was thought to have been an important factor when the Egyptian Army invaded Sinai 3 years later.

Almost everyone in Israel claimed victory, but the real problem for the Israelis was what they had failed to learn. For example, they clung to the concept of static defense, despite the fact that static defense had proven costly and had not stopped Egyptian shelling. This fault in Israeli military doctrine was further exposed 3 years later when the Bar-Lev Line failed to prevent a massive Egyptian crossing along the entire length of the Canal.

Also, when the war ended, the IAF had less command of the air than when the war had begun. The Egyptians and their Soviet allies had built a defensive missile umbrella. After the war ended, they moved the umbrella to the edge of the Canal where it would be more effective against the IAF. The umbrella disrupted the strategic bombing and interdiction that were normal parts of Israel's doctrine of taking the war to the enemy as quickly as possible, it also impeded the progress of Israeli ground forces because the IDF favored close air support rather than artillery support.

Israel believed it had won the war and assumed the Egyptians knew they had lost it. Israel believed Egypt would not fight again until it had an air force equal to Israel's. This, of course, was not the case. Israel's mistaken conclusions led it to become complacent, which allowed Egypt to surprise Israel with an attack in October 1973. Former Commander of the IAF Ezer Weizman wrote, "It is no more than foolishness to claim that we won the War of Attrition. On the contrary, for all their casualties, it was the Egyptians who got the best of it. . . . We, with our own hands, smoothed Israel's path to the Yom Kippur War."[20] ***MR***

MiG wreckage near the Suez Canal.

Embassy of Israel

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NOTES

1. Martin van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive: A Critical History of the Israeli Defense Force* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002), and Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), provide overviews of Israel's six wars. In *The War of Atonement: The Inside Story of the Yom Kippur War* (London: Greenhill Books, 2003), 7, Herzog's says that the War of Attrition is regarded in Israel as a "passing event" In *No Margin for Error: The Making of the Israeli Air Force* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 265, Ehud Yonay says the IAF has never issued a War of Attrition campaign ribbon. The official dates of the war are March 1969–August 1970, although many historians also include the time between the end of the Six-Day War and March 1969.
2. Herzog, *The War of Atonement.*
3. For more information, see on-line at <www.inter.net.il/~eizen/english.html#attrition>, accessed 9 February 2004, and <www.palestinefacts.org/pf_1967to1991_warofattrition.php>, accessed 9 February 2004.
4. Nasser bestowed the name "The War of Attrition" on the conflict.
5. Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 348; Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 289; John Laffin, *The Israeli Army in the Middle East Wars, 1948-73* (London: Osprey Publishing, 1982), 4.
6. Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars*, 207; Morris, 348.
7. Ariel Sharon with David Chanoff, *Warrior: An Autobiography* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 219-20.
8. Ibid., 219-21, 229-31; David Eshel, *Chariots of the Desert: The Story of the Israeli Armoured Corps* (London: Brassey's, 1989), 89-90; Laffin, 21.
9. Sharon with Chanoff, 231-32; Shlaim, 294-95.
10. Walter J. Boyne, *The Two O'Clock War: The 1973 Yom Kippur Conflict and the Airlift that Saved Israel* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 297-98; Eshel, 90-91; Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars*, 199.
11. Samuel M. Katz, *Arab Armies of the Middle East Wars* 2 (London: Osprey Publishing, 1988), 4; Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars*, 197-98.
12. Ian Black and Benny Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Services* (New York: Grove Press, 1991), 283.
13. Lon Nordeen, *Air Warfare in the Missile Age* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 105-106.
14. Yonay, 269-73.
15. Ibid., 273-76.
16. Ibid., 281-88.
17. Ibid., 292-97; Nordeen, 118.
18. Nordeen, 118-19; Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars*, 218.
19. Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars*, 218-19.
20. Van Creveld, 215; Shlaim, 296-97; Morris, 262-63.